

# CIDOB Policy Brief

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## THE RAVAL PROJECT: GIVING A VOICE TO THOSE WHO COULD NOT VOTE

### Background

“The Raval Project: giving a voice to those who could not vote” seeks to promote political participation, the right to vote and knowledge of the EU among citizens who were unable to participate in the 2014 European elections because of being foreigners who did not hold the nationality of any EU member states, but who reside legally within them.

Third-country nationals have no right to vote in regional, national or European elections (in some countries they cannot even vote in local elections), as the right to vote is conditional on holding the nationality of a member state. This means that these citizens remain invisible and without a voice despite the important contribution they make to European societies and the fact that local, regional, national and European policies affect them anyway. What is more, the economic and political crisis that the European Union has suffered in recent years has meant the question of integrating immigrants has been overshadowed by the change in the discourse of European public opinion. However, their integration into our societies continues to be as important as ever.

In a European context where anti-immigration discourse seems to be spreading and in the environment of El Raval, where eight elections have been held since 2010 (two local, three regional, two state and one European), it is vitally important to defend the rights of third-country nationals to vote. The project has sought to raise awareness about the issues in

question, not only with third-country nationals themselves, but also with political leaders at local level. The Raval Project concluded that the inclusion of immigrants from third countries in the political life of the EU is vital to the health of our democracies. It will help regenerate democratic processes, in both the member states and the EU in general, it will increase trust in politicians and democracy, and will strengthen the cohesion of the societies in which we live.

### Third-country nationals

When we consider the number of third-country nationals who live in the European Union, the granting of the right to vote is a logical step to take. Nearly 20 million people from third countries live in the European Union (4% of the population), of whom more than 2.5 million live in Spain, making up 57% of the country’s foreign population and around 4% of Spain’s total. In fact, Spain has the fourth-highest number of third-country nationals in the EU, ahead of the United Kingdom.

According to the [Migrant Integration Policy Index](#), Spain and France (where 67% of the foreigners are from third countries), receive a similar score on the rights to political participation (54 and 53 points on a scale of 0 to 100, respectively). However, Italy (where 71% of the foreigners are third-country nationals) and Germany (56%, which, in absolute terms, is a million more people than Spain) receive better scores for political participation, with 58 and 63 points out of 100, respectively.

Of the 2,500,000 third-country nationals in Spain, 799,447 live in Catalonia, of whom 24% are in Barcelona (193,380 people). Nearly half the population of El Raval, our case study, is foreign (48,7%), and it is also the neighbourhood in Barcelona with the highest level of third-country nationals (more than 20,000 people, making up more than 40% of the total population of El Raval).

## Main conclusions

This project has observed the direct impact of the economic crisis and the application of austerity policies on third-country nationals, increasing their invisibility, making the achievement of their aspirations more difficult and hampering their integration. In this sense, neither political elites nor some third-country nationals see the granting of the right to vote and political participation to people from third countries as a tool that could facilitate integration. Some third-country nationals do not see the relationship between having political rights and being able to influence their situation, as they tend to be more focussed on the welfare of their families and are not a homogeneous group. Although at some point all foreigners have the possibility of obtaining Spanish nationality, the ease of acquiring it, along with the right to vote, varies according to the country of origin. The lack of organisation and coordination between the different communities, as well as the lack of empathy and a degree of self-marginalisation of the nationalities that find it easier than others to gain the nationality are all factors that impede a united fight for the right to vote.

Third-country nationals do not feel protected by the administration and often the administration does not adequately aid their full integration. It is necessary to adapt all the levels of administration to provide better support to integration policies and understand the needs and demands of third-country nationals. It is vitally important to adapt public services to this reality, in particular the education and health services, as well as creating an easier and more accessible channel of communication with the administration. These citizens also see the need for the administration to provide more and better training for learning the local language and improved recognition of foreign university qualifications.

The distinction between the right to residence (permanent or temporary) and not having political rights perpetuates and strengthens third-country nationals' feelings of being second-class citizens. An obvious demand is made with regard to this situation: if they contribute to the society in which they live by paying taxes, they must have the same political rights as any other national in the country.

Although the level of the administration to which third-country nationals feel closest is the local (which is also the level to which they direct their demands), they trust the omnipresence of the European Union. The majority do not know how the EU works, but they believe in its virtues and that it has the capacity to influence their well-being at national level.

## Policy recommendations

- 1. Do not link the holding of host-country nationality to the power to exercise the political rights that correspond to citizens.** Having the right to vote is a means and an end at the same time. It is a way because third-country nationals with political rights will contribute to making our societies more democratic. It is an end because reducing the distance between national citizens and those of third countries – our societies will be more cohesive.
- 2. More flexibility in migration laws and respect for human rights.** Bearing in mind that long-term residence in the EU is the only way for third-country nationals who do not receive nationality to live and work legally in member states, the loss of work should not imply the loss of freedom of movement within the EU, because this hinders mobility within the European labour market and the capacity to refind work. Further, movement to other member states should be permitted without losing the rights accumulated, such as the period of residence (to acquire nationality) or health coverage. In the same way, respect for human rights must be guaranteed, with access to basic services for third-country nationals protected. Avoiding disputes at the borders would also aid integration, as they have a negative influence on the image third-country nationals have of the host country and, at the same time, constitute a violation of human rights (“hot returns” and the indiscriminate use of force).
- 3. Adapt the administration so as to be able to handle the challenges facing third-country nationals, changing from being a host society to a truly integrated one.** Public administrations should not treat third-country nationals as a homogeneous group; even if they share points of interest and common concerns, attempts should be made to understand individual situations. In this area, of particular relevance is the recognition of university qualifications from third countries to facilitate qualified workers' access to the labour market.
- 4. Consult the population that will be affected by policies when designing them and improve them through evaluations.** Seeking to adapt the administration to face the challenge of integrating third-country nationals and designing policies to improve their situation without consulting them may diminish both the policies' effectiveness and their adaptation. Establishing channels of dialogue between third-country nationals and the administration is key. Once the public policies have been designed in consultation with third-country nationals, assessment mechanisms must be set up to see whether they are achieving the expected results and, if not, change them.
- 5. The best channel for dialogue is the right to vote.** Ability to influence the choice of political leaders means capacity to influence the decisions they make. Going from being residents to being voters turns groups of third-country nationals into parties to be considered when designing the policies that affect them. Although they do not vote as one because they are not a homogeneous group, their capacity to organise themselves politically would be a factor to take into account.

6. **The European Union should take advantage of its good image among the majority of third-country nationals.** Promoting a European citizenship linked to residence in member states that allows a vote in the European Parliament elections would give a boost to the European integration project. Participation in the European elections could be the prelude to participation in the elections in the member states where third-country nationals are unable to vote.
7. **Reinforcing the links between third-country nationals and the administrations.** There are two links that must be strengthened to improve the well-being of third-country nationals: the link with the local administration, because it is the one they feel closest to and know best; and the link with the European institutions in order to develop a European consciousness that fits with the European values of tolerance and integration. The local administration and third-country nationals' associations should unite to raise their demands with the administrations with the power to solve or respond to their demands, as well as those that they are capable of pressuring, in order to find feasible solutions at national level.

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